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FORMS OF PRAYER.

BY

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FORMS OF PRAYER.

A zealous and intelligent Churchman, Mr. Jones, noticing at church one Sunday a neighbour of his, Mr. Smith, and believing him to be an earnest-minded, sincere man, but much prejudiced against the Church, resolved to avail himself of the first opportunity that might present itself to talk to him about it. This was a wise resolution; and it is to be much wished that other Churchmen would do the same.

It was not long before the opportunity wished for presented itself; and, accordingly, his friend, Mr. Jones, said: "I was glad to see you at church lately, Mr. Smith; I hope that you were pleased with the service."

"I must acknowledge," replied the other, "there were some things with which I was pleased; but, to be equally candid with you, there were other things that I did not like."

Mr. J.—That is very probable. Now, my friend, as you appear so candid, perhaps you will kindly let me know what are the things you liked, and what are the things you did not like.

Mr. S.—I am quite willing to do that. I liked the sermon very much. It was a sound Gospel discourse, although not well delivered; yet it contained so much truth, clearly and forcibly put, that, on my return home, I remembered most of it; and, besides, it did me good, which, I always think is, after all, the *main thing*. I was also struck with the apparent devotion of the congregation, in which there was much less staring about than is usual with us. But I did not like the singing, it was too fine, and it was all done by the

choir. I don't think Christians should sing God's praises *by proxy*. I like to hear the whole congregation join in singing; and then, as to your *prayers*, they are nothing but *forms*.

Mr. J.—We will not say anything to-day in reference to the singing; about which we do not differ much; but I feel tempted to say something about the question of *forms of prayer*.

Mr. S.—I shall be glad to hear all you can say on the subject; for I feel quite sure that you can never convince me that such prayers are the best, or at all to be compared to those, which the man of God, who is untrammelled by forms, offers up, when he draws near the throne of the Eternal and pours forth, on behalf of his people, such earnest, heartfelt supplications as can never be uttered by the man of forms!

Mr. J.—I am glad that you are willing to hear what I have to say on this important subject, and I will endeavour, as well as I can, to shew you, that you should not object to our prayers merely because they are pre-composed; for we find in the Bible many instances of pre-composed forms of devotion; and I suppose that you will not call in question the authority of that blessed book. It is a fact worthy of consideration, that the first occasion of public worship, to which the children of Israel were summoned; after they had crossed the Red Sea, was celebrated by chanting a piece of liturgical composition: “Then sang Moses and the children of Israel this song unto the Lord and spake, saying, ‘I will sing unto the Lord, for he hath triumphed gloriously: the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea,’ ” &c. You will find the whole in Ex. xv., 1-19. This is one of the sublimest and most beautiful specimens of devotional composition ever written, and was admirably suited to the occasion, in itself sublime,

awful and triumphant. This same hymn became afterwards a part of the Jewish liturgy ; and it may now be found in the Jewish morning services of Rome, Germany, and Spain ; and in several of the old liturgies of the Arabic Christians, who may be supposed to have retained it from the Jewish service. Again, for the expiation of uncertain murder, it was ordered by God himself, that “the elders of the city next unto the slain man should take a heifer, and, after having slain her, should wash their hands in her blood, and say, “Our hands have not shed this blood, neither have our eyes seen it. Be merciful, O Lord, unto thy people Israel, whom thou hast redeemed, and lay not innocent blood unto thy people Israel’s charge.” Again, God gave the priests a set form, by which they were to bless the people : “The Lord bless thee and keep thee, the Lord make his face to shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee,” &c.—Num. vi., 23-26. The 26th chapter of Deuteronomy is an interesting specimen of a prescribed liturgical service, ceremonial, responsive, and declaratory of covenant engagements : and in numerous other portions of the writings of Moses are found prescribed forms, adapted to various occasions, allotted to persons, people, and priests, according to the portions assigned unto each. The temple service, ordered and arranged by Solomon, was minute and circumstantial in its prescribed liturgical assignments. As restored after the captivity by Nehemiah, it was the *same*, for it was “done according to the commandment of David and Solomon his son.”—Neh. xiii., 46. The Psalms of David, as seems to be generally acknowledged, are nearly all liturgical ; and were assigned to the priests, people, and choir. In short, the Hebrew ritual in process of time grew up to be a comprehensive

system for common and special occasions ; and all under the *direction* of those *authorized* by ALMIGHTY GOD to arrange such a service. Here then, my friend, we have ample authority for the use of forms of prayer in our public worship.

Mr. S.—But all this was under the OLD TESTAMENT dispensation, which was emphatically one of forms and ceremonies ; all of which are done away in Christ. We find none such in the New Testament.

Mr. J.—It is true, the Gospel does not, with the minuteness of the Mosaic law, prescribe any complete Liturgical service ; yet, I contend, we can find enough in the New Testament fully to warrant our use of forms of prayer. We are told by Josephus that the Jews had such forms of prayer in their *temple* and synagogues, in the time of our blessed Lord ; and his declaration is sustained by many subsequent writers of undoubted authority. Now we are expressly told, by the Evangelist, that our blessed Lord attended these services, both in temple and synagogue ; nor can we ever for a moment suppose, that he was there merely as an *idle spectator*, while the true Israel was worshipping the God of their fathers. Equally impossible is it for us to believe that he would have sanctioned by his presence a mode of worship in itself unbecoming the service of the sanctuary, and unauthorized by Divine prescription. And it is a remarkable fact, that we find in the Gospel no condemnation by our blessed Lord of this form of worship. He could denounce the profanity of the Sadducees and the hypocrisy of the Pharisees ; but we no where find him upbraiding any with *using forms of prayer*. Had he thought that men could not worship God in sincerity and truth, after a prescribed form, we can easily imagine how he would have objected to their use in plain and

unequivocal terms. But we find no such objection to them in the Gospel; we rather are satisfied that he approved of them, inasmuch as he constantly FREQUENTED *the place where they were used*.

Mr. S.—But if Christ had intended forms of prayer to be used in his Church, would he not have prescribed them for the use of his members.

Mr. J.—Before coming to that conclusion, you should recollect that the Jewish ritual was in use during the whole of our blessed Lord's ministry, and during the lives of all the Apostles, except the latter part of St. John's life. There was nothing in this ritual to which they could object; and, therefore, there was the less reason, while the temple stood, for superseding it by any Liturgy formally prescribed for the use of Christians. But, though we do not claim that our blessed Lord or his inspired Apostles set forth any complete Liturgy, yet, I think, you must acknowledge, that when our blessed Lord gave his prayer to the disciples, he *gave a strong and decided sanction to forms of prayer*. It seems that John the Baptist, being the herald of a new dispensation, and preaching repentance for the remission of sins, it was necessary that his disciples should have forms of devotion adapted to their peculiar circumstances; and that, therefore, he had given them such a form of prayer. In like manner Christ's disciples, feeling that they needed a new one, suited to their circumstances, on a certain occasion, as our Saviour was praying, when he had ceased, one of his disciples said unto him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." And he said unto them "when ye pray say, Our Father, which art in heaven," &c. Now I ask you, my friend, *what higher authority can we demand for Forms of Prayer than this? What more encouraging assurance can we seek than such prayers, when*

offered up by devout hearts, shall rise with acceptance to the mercy seat? And it is well worthy of remark, that when our blessed Lord gave directions for private prayer (as in the 6th chapter of St. Matthew, 5th and 6th verses,) he gave no form whatever; but when he gave direction for united worship he gave that inimitable form just alluded to.

But this prayer of our Lord is not the only sanction that we derive from the New Testament for forms of prayer: we find another in Acts iv., verses 24 to 30. This was taken, in fact, from the Jewish Liturgy; and in regard to it, it is said by St. Luke that "They lifted up their voice with one accord," shewing most distinctly, that there was *unity of worship* among the disciples on that occasion.

It is well known that liturgies were used in the Churches from the times immediately succeeding the Apostles. These are called "*Common Prayers*," by Justin Martyr, of the former part of the second century; "*Constituted Prayers*," by Origen, of the first part of the third century; and "*Solemn Prayers*," by Cyprian, of the middle of the third century. There was no controversy on this question from the days of the Apostles to the fifth century, when various liturgies were published. From that time down to the Reformation, in the sixteenth century, it is *universally admitted* that liturgies, full and complete, were in constant use, all over the Christian world, and prescribed for the use of Christians by the ecclesiastical authorities of the different times. It is well worthy of remark, that the ancient Syrian Church, discovered in 1801, by Dr. Claudio Buchanan, on the coast of Malabar, in India, and which had never any intercourse with Rome, and none with western Christians for thirteen hundred years from the Apostolic age,

was *utterly ignorant of extempore prayers*, and possessed a Liturgy, believed by its Bishop to have been co-eval with its origin. "There," says the excellent Missionary, "as in all Churches in a state of decline, there is too much formality in the worship. But they have the Bible and a Scriptural Liturgy, and these will save a Church in the worst of times."

Mr. S.—For my part, I should rely most on the Bible.

Mr. J.—And so, my friend, most assuredly would I; and all sound Churchmen too. What I would endeavour to impress upon you is this, that in possessing the Prayer Book we have, under God, *a great conservator of the faith*; and I think you would fully concur with me in the great advantages we possess in this respect, if you could compare the state of many parts of Protestant Christendom, where they use it not, with those where they do use it.

Mr. S.—That is a curious argument.

Mr. J.—But still, I contend, a just one, and, moreover, a very conclusive one; many once orthodox congregations, amongst those who rejected forms of prayer, have fallen from the faith once delivered to the saints. But *we can challenge the whole world to produce a single instance of a congregation, or a respectable minority of a congregation, belonging to our Church, thus falling away!* Some few of our clergy have at times, alas! fallen into grievous errors; but they *could not carry their congregations with them*. Fortunately *the teaching of the reading desk was an antidote to the teaching of the pulpit*: the people were enabled to detect the false teaching of the latter, and thus were providentially saved. But it was not so with those who had rejected forms of prayer: as their pastors fell into errors, their prayers

became as full of errors as their sermons; and the poor people were carried along with them.

Mr. S.—This certainly appears to be a very great advantage, and one of which I had never thought until now.

Mr. J.—But this is not the only advantage of pre-composed prayers. We escape many other evils, beside that of heresy. A writer, who knows whereof he affirms, asserts, that by them we escape, 1st. "Doctrinal prayers; or such as are calculated to teach certain peculiar doctrines. 2nd. Historical prayers. 3rd. Hortatory prayers. 4th. Denunciatory prayers. 5th. Personal prayers, designed by the persons offering them to convey some rebuke or commendation to a person present. 6th. Eloquent prayers. 7th. Familiar, or irreverent prayers. 8th. Sectarian prayers, destitute of the loving spirit of the Gospel. 9th. Laudatory prayers. 10th. Political prayers. 11th. Unforgiving prayers. 12th. Blundering prayers," and fourteen other kinds "more or less objectionable." If this be so, (and I should like you, Mr. Smith, as a candid man to tell me if you have ever heard such prayers,) we *certainly escape a great evil* by having the prayers, that we offer up in public, carefully prepared beforehand by those competent to prepare them, and carefully considered by us, before we offer them.

Mr. S.—As you ask me, as a candid man, whether I have ever heard such prayers as you speak of, I must confess that I have; and that I have been greatly pained when hearing them.

Mr. J.—I thank you for your candour. I would ask you to look over our Book of Common Prayer, and see whether you can find one there, which gives you pain when it is offered up.

Mr. S.—I shall be glad to do so; for I conceive it to be a *very important point*, connected with

public worship, that the prayers offered up be *fit for God to hear*, as well as for man to offer; I will get a Prayer Book at once, and examine and judge for myself.

Mr. J.—Allow me to mention to you a few commendations of our Book of Common Prayer, which are to be met with in the writings of eminent dissenters. Dr. Doddridge, an English Presbyterian minister, in the first part of the eighteenth century, and author of “A Family Expositor,” says of the Prayer Book: “The language is so plain as to be level to the capacity of the meanest, and yet so noble as to raise the capacity of the highest.”

Dr Adam Clarke, the distinguished commentator of the Wesleyan Methodists, declares it “superior to everything of the kind produced by either ancient or modern times; several of the prayers and services of which were in use from the first ages of Christianity.” “The Litany,” he says again, “is almost universally esteemed by the devout and pious of every denomination, and next to the translation of the Scriptures into the English language, is the *greatest work of the Reformation*. As a form of devotion, it has no equal in any part of the Universal Church of God. *Next to the Bible, it is the book of my understanding and my heart.*”

The Rev. Robert Hall, an eminent Baptist minister of England during the latter part of the last and the beginning of this century, says of our Prayer Book, “The *evangelical purity* of its sentiments, the *chastened fervor* of its devotions, and the *majestic simplicity* of its language, have combined to place it in the *very first rank* of uninspired compositions.”

I would also mention that the late Dr. Morrison, an eminent Missionary to China from the London

were congregated. The one was a Presbyterian Minister, the other was a student of divinity belonging to that denomination. They very wisely waited on an old and experienced minister of their body, one whose worth, wisdom and piety were well known, and asked him, among other things, "how they could best conduct the worship of Almighty God." His answer was clear and distinct. "There are two ways, and two ways only, if your language is prompt and easy, if your hearts overflow with devout affections, if you have a thorough knowledge of the scheme of salvation by Christ, and if you can always trust yourself, you may forego all previous preparation; but if such is not the case, you are bound to prepare your prayers as thoroughly as you do your sermons." The gentleman who gave this account of the interview which he and his young friend had with the wise old minister, says, that, on reflecting on this advice, he was led into this train of thought: "if this be so, (and of it I have no doubt,) would it not be better still, if the prayers for public worship were prepared by the ablest, most experienced, and most devout ministers amongst us, especially in the case of young and inexperienced ministers." But he says he did not stop there; but reflected further; "would it not still be better, if we could get the best prayers that have ever been composed for public worship since the Christian era, prayers composed by men of whom the world was not worthy, by saints and martyrs who lived in the days of fiery persecution." While he was pondering on these things a copy of our "Book of Common Prayer" was given him; and on examination, he found it to be the very thing which his judgment had told him he wanted. This incident changed the course of his life. Instead of entering the Presbyterian ministry, he sought orders at the hand of a Bishop, and has been himself for many

years exercising the duties of that high office in the Church of Christ.

Mr. S.—On reflection, it seems to me that the old minister gave the young men good advice ; for if speaking to men is important, as the minister does when he preaches, how much more important is it that he should use right words when he addresses himself to the Almighty ?

Mr. J.—You are quite right, my friend ; and I can hardly see how this can be secured, except by having prayers for public worship prepared beforehand. This seems to have been the opinion of Calvin and John Knox, and John Wesley ; all of whom left liturgies for their followers. In the present day many excellent forms are put forth for *family worship*, by ministers, who *are forbidden to use forms of public worship*, where surely they are still more suitable, than in family worship. I am also thankful to say that the yearning for liturgies is becoming very strong, whilst the prejudices against them are fast decreasing. Even the Moderator of the Church of Scotland, two years ago, at the close of the general assembly, recommended the return of the members of the Kirk of Scotland to the use of forms of prayer in public worship. One of the ministers of Glasgow uses a liturgy regularly every Sunday in his Church. For these reasons, and many others which I could give you, (if time permitted) I prefer forms of prayer in public worship ; and I trust that you will ponder upon what you have heard and give it due consideration.

Mr. S.—I certainly shall. I must acknowledge that I did not think so much could be said in favour of forms of prayer ; and when I attend your Church again, I will, at least, look upon them with greater respect than I have yet done. I shall also examine the Prayer Book, and compare it with the Bible.

Mr. J.—And may “God give you a right judgment in all things !” Good bye.

